

POWERED BY Dialog

BELATED BUYOUT*St. Louis Post Dispatch, Sunday, March 24, 2002**Edition: FIVE STAR LIFT, Section: EDITORIAL, Page: B2***HERCULANEUM**

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AFTER decades of denial and delay -- and months of mounting pressure -- Doe Run Co. is trying to transform itself from scofflaw to good corporate citizen. It agreed last week to buy out 160 homes near its Herculaneum plant, recognizing what has been evident for a long time: The nation's largest lead smelter should never have been operating in a residential neighborhood. The cost to residents, especially children, is unconscionably high.

Tests conducted last year revealed that 56 percent of children living within a quarter mile of the smelter had elevated blood lead levels, putting them at risk for behavioral problems, reduced intelligence and other health problems. Despite the buyout, serious questions remain:

* Just outside the new buy-out zone lie several contaminated properties where other young children live. What about them?

* Within the buy-out zone, only 26 of 160 homes will be purchased immediately. No timetable has been set for acquiring the remaining units. How much longer will kids living there be exposed to toxic lead? Some families will be reluctant to move; that's understandable. But they should move for the sake of their children, and perhaps their own health as well. Lead is harmful to adults, too, causing long-term health problems. State health officials should make it clear that this is a serious health threat to everyone.

* No formula has been set for establishing "fair market value," which is what Doe Run has promised to pay for the homes. After months of revelations about lead contamination, it's a safe bet that the market value of Herculaneum homes is depressed. Doe Run should compensate owners for what its problems have done to the value of their homes.

* There is also no assurance that public health authorities will have the money to continue monitoring children who move away from Herculaneum. Lead can wreak havoc all through life if kids are poisoned when their nervous systems are developing rapidly. Sen. Christopher S. Bond's idea of obtaining up to \$3 million of federal funds for the study -- supported this week by Gov. Bob Holden -- might make monitoring possible in a time of tight budgets.

* Finally, there remains the question of whether Doe Run will ever meet strict emission standards. The company has spent millions trying, and state and federal officials have promised to make sure the company complies with the law. But the people of Herculaneum have heard that for at least 40 years. The result has been a legacy of broken promises and poisoned children.

The government must force the company to operate within the law, even if that means shutting down the smelter temporarily or hitting it with big fines.

Clean up or pay up. Move folks out. Enforce the laws. Follow the long-term health of the kids and adults. Make sure the "clean-up" continues. If the smelter continues polluting, establish a "dead zone" around it. Make sure none of its poison leaves the site -- on a stiff breeze, as rainwater, or as deep contamination of the soil. Get it done.

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